

Watsonville - Annexation Annexation backer gave participants gifts, money

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WATSONVILLE — A supporter of Watsonville's annexation plan admitted using the promise of money and gift certificates to attract a group of Latinos to the Local Agency Formation Commission's hearing on the issue last Wednesday.

Elias Alonzo, a leading supporter of the city's plan to annex 219 acres of prime farmland at Riverside Drive and Highway 1 for an industrial park, said that gas money was provided to some who couldn't afford to make the trip to Lakeview Middle School outside town and others were given the Kmart certificates.

Watsonville Mayor Al Alcalá said the city had no knowledge of the payments. "No way," Alcalá said. "I talked to (city manager) Carlos Palacios when I heard about the coupons. He said 'Jesus, what the hell is going on out there?' The city would have nothing

to do with that. There's no reason for that."

LAFCO Executive Director Pat McCormick said he could not remember this type of thing ever happening for a LAFCO hearing.

"We certainly encourage all forms of public participation," McCormick said. "But we think it's ill-advised for anybody to be paid to participate in the democratic process."

In justifying the payment, Alonzo lashed out at both LAFCO and annexation opponents.

"It's a real malicious contortion of the facts," said Alonzo, who has worked to rally support for the proposal in the city's Latino community. "The people who are in opposition, they like to pick on the poor, the downtrodden, the helpless. They'd love for them to be unable to attend these sessions."

Alonzo also had harsh words for LAFCO. "It deliberately, purposely, had the meeting over in that

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area instead of down here in Watsonville where everyone could attend."

McCormick said it was not LAFCO's intent to exclude anyone, which is why the meeting was held at Lakeview. He said the school was the best location for all parties involved.

"It was not done to purposely exclude people," he said. "It is in the community and reasonably convenient for everyone."

McCormick said the meeting could have been held at City Hall, but it was not big enough to handle the crowd. An estimated 350 attended the hearing at Lakeview.

Rumors of payments began circulating at the meeting Wednesday night. A Latino man approached a reporter for the Register Pajaronian and asked her in Spanish where he could redeem his coupon for \$15.

Because she does not speak Spanish, a man attending the meeting intervened to help translate.

"He asked me in Spanish where to get his money," said Alfredo Escandon, who tried to assist the man. "The voucher was written in Spanish and it said 'the value of this coupon is \$15, please come to the LAFCO meeting.' He said it had been given to him that afternoon in the downtown area and

that he wanted to be compensated."

The man reportedly told Escandon that he walked from downtown to Lakeview — about 3 miles — to collect the money.

Alonzo said a group of annexation supporters from "grass-roots groups had passed a hat around to collect money." The money was used, Alonzo said, to help Latino supporters with few resources in attending the meeting.

"Some families didn't have the means to get there," Alonzo said, who added that car pools were formed. He said one man was compensated both for gas and his time.

"They had to be driven there," Alonzo said. "Gas money was provided to them. The idea was to pass the hat around and give them some coupons. They could trade them for (gift certificates) at Kmart where they could buy diapers and medicines."

Watsonville Kmart Manager Rich Moore said Monday his store discontinued the use of gift certificates a month ago. "This is the first I've heard of it," he said. "We don't use gift certificates so there's something wrong with that story."

Alonzo would not reveal any individuals involved in the collection or distribution of the money. But he did say payments of \$5, \$10 and \$15 were made. He added that he contributed to the fund but did not

say how much money was raised.

After Alonzo spoke before the commission in support of the proposal, a large group of Latinos followed him out of the meeting where they gathered together in the parking lot. Alonzo said he was arranging rides for those who needed them. "This community is so damn poor," he said. "We just wanted to help some of these people get out there."

"Car pools, that's what it was all about," Alonzo added. "This is very discouraging. It's not about me, it's about our community. That it's taken this turn is too bad."

The payments prompted a leading annexation opponent, farmer Sam Earnshaw, to wonder out loud just how far supporters would go to see the annexation approved. "Ethically, it's extremely questionable," he said. "I saw the mariachi band playing out in front and I thought the Latino community was getting involved. Then I find out they were paid to come."

Added Escandon, also an opponent: "It's always to my disappointment and dismay when the disenfranchised are used to make a point."

The LAFCO hearing will be continued Oct. 1 at Lakeview, 2350 E. Lake Ave. The commission is expected to decide on the proposal at its November session.